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ABSTRACT

Responding to a call to action by California's state leaders to make reading instruction in the early grades a top priority in the public schools, this booklet discusses California's new K-3 reading program. It begins with a discussion of what prompted this new focus on reading, and then discusses the four major elements of a balanced reading program: (1) a strong literature, language, and comprehension program; (2) an organized, explicit skills program that includes phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling; (3) ongoing diagnosis to inform teachers and parents about individual student progress; and (4) a powerful early intervention program to help children catch up when they are having problems. The booklet also discuses instruction of English language learners; challenges beyond the K-3 classroom; whether educators will be able to implement these changes; older students; how long it will take to see results; measuring program effectiveness; and the role of parents and the community. A nine-item list of publications and websites is attached. (RS)

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ED 420 031

a Guide to California's new K-3 Reading program

California's state leaders have made reading instruction in the early grades (K–3) a top priority in the public schools. This "call to action" is encouraging local schools to focus resources, rethink priorities, and solicit public support around

a single goal:

"All children in California will be reading at grade level or above by the end of third grade."

EDSOURCE SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT PROJECT

CS013192

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THE CALIFORNIA CONTEXT

How to use this Guide

Parents, community members, and school site or school district groups can use this Guide to:

- Increase understanding of state policies and laws that affect the schools in your community.
- Provide a common background for discussions between educators and community members about an important school improvement issue.
- Increase awareness of what is or isn't happening in local schools.

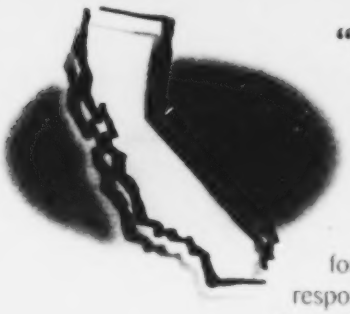
Make this a working document!

✓ Read and discuss "The California Context" and "Putting Policies Into Action" sections and use them as a frame of reference.

✓ Make notes in the "What's Happening" boxes about the programs going on and being planned in your local classrooms and schools.

✓ Use the "A Critical Focus" and "Important Questions" sections as starting points for discussing complex and sometimes difficult issues.

✓ To get more information or get more involved, look at the "Where To Go Next" section that lists references and organizations.



"All children in California will be reading at grade level or above by the end of third grade."

Learning to read well in the early grades is crucial

Learning to read is not simply a goal within itself. It is truly the foundation for all other academic learning, career success, and responsible participation in a democracy. Further, learning to read in the early grades unlocks the door to learning throughout life. Research shows that children who are behind in reading achievement at the end of first grade are likely to be below grade level at fourth grade and may never reach expected achievement levels. We can prevent many long-term academic problems by making sure all students learn to read well during their early years in school.

What prompted California's new focus on reading?

Several forces came together as catalysts for the California Reading Initiative, one of the largest education reform initiatives ever undertaken in the United States.

The highest priority for schools. More than 90% of Californians polled believe that the ability to read, write, and speak English well should be required for high school graduation. These requirements, together with the ability to perform basic mathematical functions, topped the list of what the public expects, as reported in *Priority One: Schools That Work*, a 1996 opinion research study.

1994 reading test results raised alarm. The need for change in California became painfully apparent with the release of the Grade 4 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results for 1994. The group of 6,000 California fourth graders tested ranked above only students in Guam in overall reading proficiency. Fifty-nine percent were below a basic level of proficiency, compared to 44% nationally, and only 14% were at or above proficient, compared to 21% nationally.

"Children who cannot read will not be successful in school or in life. If we lose sight of this simple fact, we will lose a generation of children."

Every Child A Reader
California Reading Task Force
1995

All of this does not say that the students couldn't read at all, but rather that they couldn't read well enough. "Below Basic" was defined as having little or no mastery of the knowledge and skills necessary to perform work at grade level. State officials report that more than 80% of the fourth graders tested in California seemed to have difficulty comprehending what they read. They did not show an ability to draw conclusions, extend ideas, or connect their reading to other things they knew.

In response, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction convened a Reading Task Force charged with developing recommendations for improving student achievement.

Research supports change. Simultaneously, a strong new research base was emerging that explains how children learn to read, how good readers differ from poor readers, and why some teaching practices are particularly effective. The research indicates that the nature of reading instruction students receive is an extremely powerful predictor of reading success.

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The 1995 Reading Task Force report, *Every Child A Reader*, based its recommendations both on this research and on testimony from various reading experts. That report became the basis for California's new reading initiative, which seeks to apply these lessons in primary classrooms throughout the state.

Resources expand. A newly robust California economy and a corresponding increase in state tax revenues meant that schools received a substantial increase in funding. In June 1996, Governor Pete Wilson and the California Legislature agreed to allocate nearly $1 billion to strengthen teaching and learning in kindergarten through third grade, with a special focus on reading instruction. This included $770 million for class-size reduction in the primary grades. Funds also were earmarked for teacher professional development in reading instruction, new reading materials, leadership training for administrators and school board members, and improved preparation in reading instruction for new teachers. In the 1997–98 budget year, funding was increased substantially.

NOTE: The research referred to throughout this Guide is cited in the California Department of Education documents listed on page 12.

What's happening in your school or district?

Who to contact

Classroom teachers can explain reading curriculum, materials, and instructional strategies in general, and particularly those they use in their own classrooms.

School principals know how reading instruction is coordinated both between grade levels and to meet children's individual needs.

Parent leaders, whether they are members of the PTA/parent organization or the school site council, can encourage and help set up informational meetings and forums about reading issues or new curriculum.

District administrators and school board members are responsible for selecting curriculum materials, establishing expectations for student performance, and general management and oversight of the district's finances and programs.

About EdSource

EdSource is an independent nonprofit organization dedicated to clarifying complex education issues. Since 1977, EdSource has provided accurate, impartial information about statewide school finance and education policy issues to education, community, business, and government leaders throughout California.

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What's happening in your school or district?

Four Major Elements for a Balanced Reading Program

In direct response to the earlier Reading Task Force report, in 1996–97 the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, the State Board of Education, and the Commission on Teacher Credentialing developed a program advisory called *Teaching Reading*. Its purpose was to help public schools develop and implement a balanced, comprehensive reading program in the early grades. This advisory recommended that four elements be included in every California school district's K–3 reading program. Experts believe that the state's reading goal for all students can only be reached if all four of the elements are in place.

1. *A strong literature, language, and comprehension program.*

The goal for students

More than anything else, a strong literature and language program can motivate children to read, write, speak, and listen. Children become competent at these very important basic skills only by doing them.

Why it's important

Reading, vocabulary, and comprehension work in a continuous cycle. The single most valuable thing children can do to improve their reading ability is simply to read – a lot. The more a child reads, the more words he learns and the stronger his vocabulary becomes. The better a child's vocabulary and reading ability, the better she comprehends what she reads. The more a child comprehends, the more satisfying reading becomes for him and the more he reads. According to research, the 90th percentile fifth grader reads about 200 times more text per year than the 10th-percentile reader. All children should be encouraged not only to read frequently, but broadly and thoughtfully, as well.

Students need to read 1 million words per year to significantly improve their spelling and vocabulary. For a fifth grader, for example, that's 20 minutes per day of sustained reading.

What it might look like in the classroom

- Children read often – silently and aloud to each other and the teacher.
- Teachers read aloud to students.
- Oral language activities abound, including storytelling, choral reading or dramatics, and student presentations.
- Individual and classroom writing assignments of many different types are tied to reading, personal experiences, and other classroom learning.
- Reading materials include literature, nonfiction, magazines, and newspapers, plus beginning technical materials like recipes and directions.
- Students are taught to ask strategic questions like "What is the author's point of view?" and "Is the text consistent with what I already know and believe?"
- To aid comprehension, students and teachers talk and write about what they read, clarify difficult sections, analyze meaning, summarize, and reflect on the materials.
- Children are taught new vocabulary words related to what they read and write, including explicit definitions plus word usage and shades of meaning.

2. An organized, explicit skills program that includes phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling.

The goal for students

To be fluent readers, children need to develop an understanding of how sounds and letters relate to spoken language and the written word in English. Children start reading well when this understanding becomes second nature so they can instantly and effortlessly turn written letters into words they hear in their "mind's ear."

Why it's important

New research on reading disabilities indicates that if children cannot hear and manipulate the sounds in spoken words, they have an extremely difficult time learning how to match those sounds to the letters and letter patterns found in the written language. This "phonemic awareness" is characterized in the California Reading Initiative materials as "the most important ... factor separating normal and disabled readers."

Research also indicates that combining temporary or inventive spelling with systematic, formal spelling instruction results in more rapid growth in both correct spelling and word recognition. Formal spelling instruction also helps children see patterns in how words are put together and learn spelling rules.

What it might look like in the classroom

- Beginning in kindergarten, students are encouraged to "play" with the sounds of language through rhyming, matching sounds, changing sounds in words, and blending sounds.
- Teachers screen children for phonemic awareness and, if necessary, give them focused practice to develop awareness of words, syllables, and sounds.
- Teachers instruct students about the sounds represented by letters and letter clusters, beginning with short vowel sounds and simple consonants (cat, dog, pin) and moving to more subtle and complex patterns (cake, school, rain).
- Students practice new letters and sounds in word patterns and in text with a high percentage of words linked to the phonics lesson.
- Teachers encourage children in kindergarten and beginning first grade to express their thoughts in print by using "temporary spelling" even before formal spelling instruction begins.
- Formal spelling instruction begins in first grade, is connected to the phonics sequence children are learning, and also is taught as part of reading and writing.
- As their skills increase, students edit their own written work and correct their own spelling.

GLOSSARY

Phonemic awareness is the insight that spoken words and syllables are made up of individual sounds.

Phonics is the study of what sounds are represented by each letter and letter combination.

Temporary spelling allows the youngest students (K–1) to begin writing spontaneously even before they learn formal spelling. This encourages students to write and helps teachers assess a student's developing knowledge of writing.

What's happening in your school or district?

What's happening in your school or district?

3. *Ongoing diagnosis to inform teachers and parents about individual student progress.*

The goal for students

Schools are expected to make sure every child learns to read and no child falls behind. Children's individual abilities and progress determine what and how they are taught.

Why it's important

Children come to school with a variety of background experiences. And youngsters learn at different rates. Regular evaluation of each child's progress – coupled with a diagnosis of what skills and strategies a child still needs to acquire – can help ensure that no child is left behind. From this continual assessment a teacher also can evaluate the effectiveness of particular teaching methods for different children and devise alternative approaches. In effect, this is how teachers make sure the reading program fits the needs of the child, instead of expecting every child to succeed in an identical reading program.

What it might look like in the classroom

- The teacher collects information about student progress on a daily or weekly basis.
- The teacher varies the teaching strategy to provide individual attention, whole class activities and small group instruction.
- Students are grouped and regrouped in different ways based on the teacher's observations about the skills and strategies they need to learn. This grouping is flexible, changing often along with students' needs and progress.
- Teachers use many different techniques – such as recitation, art, music, individual assignments, group activities, and independent reading – to teach specific and appropriate skills and strategies to individual students and small groups.
- From kindergarten to second grade, the main aim of testing is to provide teachers and parents with accurate information about each child's reading progress. Comparisons with other students and standardized reading achievement tests should not be the focus at this level.
- Skills that are explicitly taught and applied – such as letter name recognition, phonics, spelling, vocabulary, and comprehension – may be directly tested.

"The need for diagnostic information is varied ... Every kindergarten student needs to be screened for phoneme awareness with a quick and informal instrument. First graders need to be evaluated through a more systematic process of determining early reading progress. Each subsequent grade will require the use of different instruments that match instructional needs."

Every Child A Reader
Report of the California Reading Task Force
1995

4. A powerful early intervention program to help children catch up when they are having problems.

What's happening in your school or district?

The goal for students

Children who are struggling in the regular classroom and not yet achieving success get the extra help they need to learn how to read.

Why it's important

In order to realize the new and ambitious goal for all children to read at grade level by the end of third grade, California's schools must commit attention and resources to those children who need extra help. State and education leaders hope that addressing the needs of these youngsters at this earliest stage of their schooling will be an ounce of prevention. The long-term goal is to avoid many of the learning and behavior problems that emerge when students get older and are unable to succeed in school because they can't read well.

What it might look like in the classroom

- The teacher provides extra help to a child within the classroom through small groups or individual tutoring.
- If in-class interventions fail to help a child, a second level of assistance occurs, usually outside the classroom. This type of temporary intervention typically involves well-trained specialists and intense individualized instruction, and builds on regular classroom activities.
- Phonemic awareness screening and intervention can occur in kindergarten.
- Early intervention in reading usually begins in the first grade.

HOW SCHOOLS DECIDE WHAT THEY TEACH

The actual curriculum and teaching methods used in a classroom are determined in local communities – by school boards, school district administrators and experts, school site principals, teachers, and sometimes community members.

Districts differ in their processes for deciding what will be taught and how. They also differ in the amount of public involvement they encourage during the process of adopting curriculum. State law requires school districts to involve teachers in the selection of curriculum materials and to provide the public with the opportunity to review recommended materials before they are adopted. The local school board has final approval of all instructional materials.

For information on how your school district selects its curriculum, ask your school principal, school district curriculum expert, or district superintendent.

What's happening in your school or district?

English Language Learners must also learn to read

Generally, students are most likely to be successful learning to read what they can already say and understand. For children who don't come to school speaking English, the challenges in learning to read English can be enormous.

Most experts agree that the elements of a good reading program also apply to reading instruction for English Language Learners (ELL). However, there is not the same strong research consensus that exists about English speakers.

Teaching reading to ELL students presents a variety of different challenges. For Spanish-speaking students, reading materials, qualified bilingual teachers, and valuable research are usually available. When a student speaks Farsi or Russian – and teachers don't – the task is much more complex. A second grader who already speaks and reads German may learn to read English quickly. But a child who speaks Chinese – and understands the Chinese writing system – may find the whole concept of the English alphabet quite mystifying.

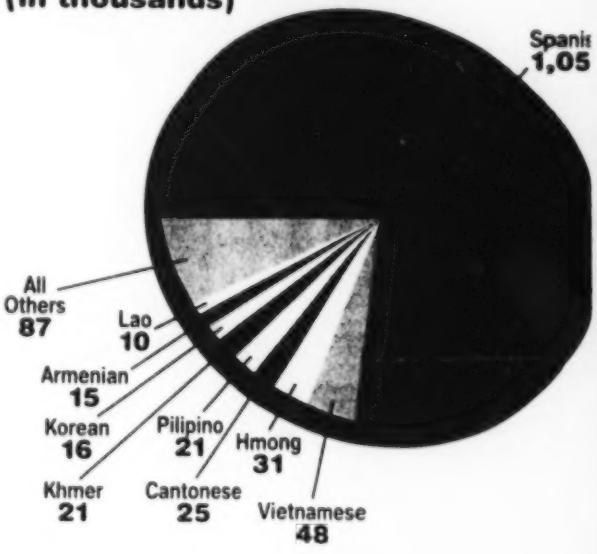
Instruction of English Language Learners requires teaching students to read as well as helping them to learn English. The current focus in California is to help educators become more effective in meeting both these goals, but the issue often becomes quite complicated and at times controversial. For one, the needs of students and the approaches to teaching them can vary dramatically from district to district, and even from school to school. Further, questions about the best way to teach English Language Learners are part of several larger political issues Californians are struggling to address both locally and at the state level.

Some questions to ask:

- How many English Language Learners are our local schools teaching?
- How many different language backgrounds do our students have?
- What strategies does our school or district use now to instruct ELL students? Why were these strategies chosen?
- What are the school's or district's expectations for ELL students?
- How are we measuring their progress both in learning English and in learning to read?
- How do we ensure that ELL students learn the other subjects in the regular curriculum while they are mastering English?
- What community resources are available to help the schools be successful with ELL students and communicate with their families?

Diverse Backgrounds

California's English Language Learners (in thousands)



Data: 1996, California Dept. of Education

EdSource, 19

Challenges beyond the K-3 classroom

California has set a new and very high standard for schools to meet: every child reading at grade level or above by the end of grade three.

Meeting this goal will require a focused and sustained commitment not only from K-3 classroom teachers, but from all teachers, school principals, district office administrators, school board members, parents, and community members. Here are some important questions members of the school community may need to address in order to create a shared understanding about reading instruction in the classroom and its potential impacts on the school and school district as a whole.

What's happening in your school or district?

Will educators be able to implement these changes?

The intense focus on reading, with the emphasis on a complete and balanced program, requires new thinking and learning by many different people. Every school district in the state has received a "Blueprint for Professional Development," which contains state leaders' recommendations for what teachers need to know. The state has provided funding for staff development. In addition, every school district administrator and school board member has been offered information and training.

Some questions to ask:

- What elements of this plan for reading instruction represent the greatest change for our teachers?
- How is the school or district making sure that all administrators, teachers, and instructional aides – both new and experienced – are prepared to implement the reading program effectively?
- What training is available for parents and other community members so they can understand, constructively influence, and support any changes the district makes?
- What is the school or district doing to make sure students and teachers have access to enough books either through the school library or other sources?
- What additional resources, if any, does the district need to be able to reach the goal?

What about the older students?

Certainly there are children in every California school who have already passed through third grade without learning how to read well. Parents and teachers of these students – to say nothing of their prospective employers – may believe that the schools ought to provide them with the same level of assistance that the California Reading Initiative provides to younger students.

Some questions to ask:

- How many children in grades four and higher in our school or district can't read at grade level?
- What are we doing now or planning to do to provide the extra help these youngsters need?
- How well equipped are upper-grade teachers to diagnose reading difficulties?
- How can the reading curriculum in the upper grades be strengthened to ensure that students continue to develop reading comprehension and thinking skills?

What's happening in your school or district?

How long will it take to see results?

The changes envisioned in the California Reading Initiative are ambitious and won't happen overnight. While excitement around this initiative is high, especially about smaller class sizes, it will take time to put these programs in place and see results. At the same time, parents in particular feel a strong sense of urgency about the quality of their own child's education.

Some questions to ask:

- What steps has the district or school taken so far to ensure that a comprehensive, balanced K–3 reading program is in place?
- What efforts has the district made to learn from other districts and experts?
- What is the district or school timeline for full implementation?
- What milestones have been identified to ensure we're making good progress?
- What do school leaders see as the major obstacles to progress?
- Are there some notable early successes? What are school leaders learning from them?

How will we know if this is working?

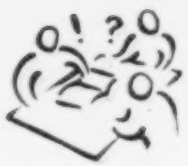
The California Reading Initiative represents a major investment of money, time, and effort. While measuring the initiative's effectiveness on a statewide basis may be difficult until California implements a statewide reading test, local progress is another matter. School districts can decide on their own methods for measuring and reporting the results of the Reading Initiative to the community. Districts also need to look at how they keep parents informed about the progress of their own children and the school.

Some questions to ask:

- What are local goals for student progress?
- What kind of student testing/assessment does the district do? At what grade levels?
- Why does the district use particular tests or measures?
- Besides student performance, what other indicators can help reveal what is working and what isn't?
- How is information about student progress used as a part of teacher evaluation?
- How are teachers and administrators evaluating overall program effectiveness? What is being reported to the community?

What can parents and the larger community do to help improve students' reading?

Research shows that children's ability to learn to read is directly and dramatically influenced by early childhood experiences. In addition, school-age children are more likely to believe reading is vital if they hear about and see evidence of its importance not only at school, but at home and out in their neighborhoods.



What's happening in your school or district?

Some questions to ask:

- What local community organizations or corporations already work with schools and parents to promote student reading?
- What resources are available — in the schools or community — to make sure children have access to sufficient reading materials at home?
- How can parents who don't speak or read English well help their children learn to read?
- What programs do local schools, libraries, or other organizations have to help parents who need to improve their own reading skills?

WHERE TO GO NEXT

For advice on helping children learn to read

The Read-Aloud Handbook by Jim Trelease. This popular guide explains the value of reading aloud to children; suggests ways to make it a successful experience for children and adults; and provides a bibliography of books particularly suitable for reading aloud. Published by Penguin Books and available in many bookstores.

Tips for Parents: How to Help Your Child Become a Better Reader. This small flier gives brief, easy to understand advice to parents, based on the California Reading Initiative. For copies contact: Comprehensive Reading Leadership Center, Sacramento County Office of Education, 9738 Lincoln Village Drive, Sacramento, CA 95827. Phone 916/228-2219. FAX 916/228-2403.

For more resources go to the web site for the U.S. Government's America Reads program: http://www.ed.gov/inits/americareads/

To get more involved

Many local, state, and national organizations are interested in improving children's reading ability by providing help to schools, advice to parents, and community-based reading programs. They include:

Reading Success Network, a network of Southern California schools pursuing schoolwide change to propel reading achievement in students. Phone 562/922-6343.

America Reads. Along with sponsoring its own Read*Write*Now summer reading initiative, this federal program has a long list of other organizations it describes as "literacy resources." Phone 800/USA-LEARN.

For more about reading instruction in California

Every Child A Reader. The official report of the California Reading Task Force, published in 1995, which led to the development of the California Reading Initiative.

Teaching Reading: A Balanced, Comprehensive Approach to Teaching Reading in Prekindergarten Through Grade Three. This 1996 program advisory describes the essential components of a complete reading program and addresses the planning necessary to implement it in schools and classrooms.

Both the above documents include a comprehensive bibliography on reading research. Many local schools and school district offices may have copies or they are available from the California Department of Education, Bureau of Publications, Sales Unit, P.O. Box 271, Sacramento, CA 95812-0271. Phone 800/995-4099. FAX 916/323-0823. http://www.cde.ca.gov/publications/pub.html.

Building a Powerful Reading Program: From Research to Practice. Discussion highlights and key findings from a 1996 seminar sponsored by the California Education Policy Seminar and the California State University Institute for Education Reform. To get copies contact: CSU Center for the Improvement of Reading Instruction, CSU Sacramento, 6000 J Street, Sacramento, CA 95819-6018. Phone 916/278-4600. (May be downloaded from www.csus.edu/ier/inst.html.)

Read All About It! This package of information, which includes a video tape, explains the California Reading Initiative to school board members and school district administrators. Elements include:

Guide to the California Reading Initiative of 1996. This brief booklet summarizes the research findings and legislative actions behind the California Reading Initiative, and includes a bibliography of research documents.

A Blueprint for Professional Development describes the skills and knowledge teachers will need in order to implement the Reading Initiative.

For copies of the full package, contact: Comprehensive Reading Leadership Center, Sacramento County Office of Education, 9738 Lincoln Village Drive, Sacramento, CA 95827. Phone 916/228-2219. FAX 916/228-2403.

About the EdSource School Involvement Project

The EdSource School Involvement Project is a family of publications designed for use by community and school groups interested in working together on education issues.

Publications include:

Understanding California's School Improvement Issues. This handbook provides a "big picture" overview of education reform issues, including curriculum, student performance, teaching and instruction, funding, governance, and accountability. 120+ pages. $24 per copy.

Get Involved! California's Public Schools Are Your Schools. This four-color pamphlet and poster explains why public education is important, describes the challenges today's schools face, and provides suggestions for meaningful, constructive public involvement in schools. $1 per single copy, $15 for 25 copies. Greater discounts available for additional quantities.

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